

# Giving a Natural Gas Company a Better Forecast

## Key Takeaways:

- Unpredictable and disastrous weather consistently impacted a natural gas company's CX solution, challenged to meet demand for call volume peaks and valleys.
- The VirtualFlex platform offers a skilled network of geo-diverse agents, avoiding regional outages that would hamper operations of affected brick-and-mortar centers.
- With consistently high QA and CSAT scores, the client also saw cost savings due to efficient utilization and not paying for idle agent time. A regional natural gas company served customers across multiple states, but a number of challenges pushed their outdated customer service system to the brink.

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The first challenge was the weather.

Natural gas customers rarely call when skies are pleasant and temperatures are warm. It is during "light up season" in the fall and winter months—the time of year when everyone calls to get their pilot light going—that call volume dramatically rises. This seasonal volatility can mean three to five times the number of calls coming in. On top of that, unpredictable weather—ranging from sudden cold snaps, to feisty rainstorms leftover from hurricanes—often brought an immediate flood of callers.

The second challenge was the company had an in-house CX division of region-specific agents who lived and worked in the same area as their customers. This meant they were often impacted by the very same storm that was affecting customers, and were potentially unavailable from the very issues and outages that made them desperately needed.

The third challenge was that the company used an old and outdated system for CX. Older technology can be a speedbump to answering calls efficiently, especially when they experience glitches or go down from a power outage. It takes a long time to get these types of tools up and running again—meaning calls won't get answered fast enough.

All these disruptions culminated in another problem: maintaining service levels that are regulated by the Utility Commission. This meant ensuring average speed-to-answer thresholds were met 80% of the time.

Seasonal call volume spikes, unpredictable weather, an old call system, and in-house CX agents who were vulnerable to the same disruptive issues impacting customers—and who took 6 weeks for the company to train—all compounded into lost time, money and less than stellar customer experience.

The company decided to explore a more innovative approach to customer service.

## Changing the Equation

The Liveops team worked with the client to understand every dimension of the problem, and it became clear there was an opportunity to make the customer experience process more efficient.

While Liveops couldn't change the weather, or the guidelines and service levels set by the Utility Commission, they helped the company understand how they could improve operation efficiencies by switching from a fixed, traditional method—to a new innovative approach to CX.



The company agreed, and while it wasn't fast or easy to change direction, a journey began that led to lasting success.

In the first year with the client, innovation took several forms. Right away, it began with augmenting their agent pool by contracting agents through the VirtualFlex network to handle call volume. Onboarding agents began with an in-depth custom certification program, developed by the Liveops Learning & Development team, in partnership with the company. The blended learning certification turned the traditional onboarding program into an efficient mix of self-paced, and instructor-led, virtual classroom sessions. The program cut onboarding time from six weeks to four weeks, and the Liveops team deployed assessments and checkpoints throughout the process to ensure knowledge transfer.

Even with the heightened call volume prompted by the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the agents through Liveops, working from home, on their own schedule, and all over the country, jumped in to help the company.

By the second year working together, the natural gas company was closer to hitting their goal of high customer service levels, even when bad weather struck.

## Flexibility, Continuity, Utilization

Innovation meant augmenting an in-house CX system with a virtual one.

The VirtualFlex platform adds flexibility to the traditional model. In a brick-and-mortar center, there is a finite number of agents available to handle calls. When demand is high, the phone lines fill up, wait times climb, and customer satisfaction falls. VirtualFlex adds elasticity to this model, flexing up to meet demand when needed.

The flexible Liveops agent network allowed the client to access a skilled pool of talent when seasonal demand was high, without the need to hire seasonal agents for the in-house centers. A virtual network, and a model that meant only paying agents for the time they answered phones, gave the company flexibility to increase headcount during peak call times (like “light up season”), or decrease it when call volume was low.

When weather took the local electric grid down, virtual agents, who are distributed across the country, were not stranded and out of commission like an in-house agent who resides in the local region. And with a far-reaching pool of driven and motivated agents looking to build their business, recruiting the talent the client needed was not a problem. All of this meant business continuity, the ability to handle call volume in a way that met regulation levels, and an improved customer experience.



## In Conclusion

The results were undeniable.

The VirtualFlex platform allowed the natural gas company to improve customer experience and maintain business continuity in the event of an unplanned event or disaster.

The virtual agents—proven to be skilled, empathetic and resourceful—maintained quality assurance metrics month-over-month, averaging 80-84%. Customer satisfaction also improved and consistently scored around 94%. Most importantly, the flexibility of the platform allowed agents to answer call demand upwards of 130% of forecasted volume, ensuring calls were answered and service levels were maintained.

While customer satisfaction rose, the company's average cost per call dropped significantly. Where an old, traditional system proved unreliable, and costly, the company embraced innovation to solve their serious CX problem.

Liveops is proud to have helped this client build and master the new, cost-effective, virtual CX system they desperately needed. In this case, one that gets the job done in rain, snow, sleet, or shine.



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